

Communicating romantic interest under contextual indeterminacy

Bachelor's thesis

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| <p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Sosiolingvistiikassa on jo pitkään tunnustettu, että kielelliset muodot eivät pelkästään korreloi erilaisten kontekstuaalisten tekijöiden kanssa, vaan ne myös itsessään viittaavat konteksteihin. Eri fonologisen tason ilmiöt, kuin myös eri rekisterien käyttö luovat mielle yhtymiä muun muassa eri sosiaalisiin kategorioihin, joihin kuulumisen on osa yksilön identiteettiä. Kuitenkin myös sosiaalisen todellisuuden muihin ilmiöihin voidaan viitata. Näihin kuuluvat kulttuuriset toiminnot ja käytännöt.</p> <p>Kandidaatintyössäni tutkin kyselytutkimuksen keinoin, millä kielellisillä keinoilla Jyväskylän yliopiston kansainvälisten maisteriohjelmien opiskelijat ilmaisevat kysyvänsä kuulijaa treffeille, eli mitkä ovat treffeille kysymisen mahdollisia kielellisiä indeksejä, jotka käyttönsä yhteydessä ikään kuin panevat tämän toiminnon täytäntöön. Tulosten perusteella näyttää olevan tiettyjä kielellisiä muotoja, joiden esiintymistiheys kasvaa sitä myötä, kun pääsy kontekstia koskevaan tietoon estyy. Osoitan näistä kolmen merkittävimmän kielellisen muodon käyttäytymisen tässä tilanteessa. Tutkielman loppupuolella pohdin, mitä nämä muodot mahtavat kertoa mahdollisesta treffikulttuurista.</p> <p>Tutkimusta rajoitti suppea otanta (n = 33). Lisäksi on pidettävä mielessä, että otanta on Jyväskylän yliopiston kansainvälisissä maisteriohjelmissa opiskelevien opiskelijoiden joukosta, eikä tutkimuksen tuloksia voida siten yleistää tuon joukon ulkopuolelle. On myös pidettävä mielessä, että vastaajien taustatietojen mahdollista vaikutusta tuloksiin ei otettu tutkimuksessa huomioon. Lisäksi tutkimuskohteen rajausta kärsi oletuksesta, että treffipyynnön toteuttavat kielelliset muodot ovat selvärajaisia ja itsessään riittäviä välittämään tuon merkityksen.</p> <p>Näistä rajoituksista huolimatta tutkimus tarjoaa mielenkiintoisia lähtökohtia jatkotutkimuksen toteuttamiselle, jossa edellä mainitut ongelmat on huomioitu. Se edistää indeksisyyttä teoreettisena viitekehyksenään hyödyntävää sosiolingvististä tutkimusperinnettä koskiessaan myös identiteetin ulkopuolisia sosiaalisia ilmiöitä, erityisesti sosio-kulttuurisia toimintoja. Lisäksi se tarjoaa tavan käsittää yksittäiset kontekstit asteittaisina siinä, miten epätarkasti konteksti on kyselyn yhteydessä määritelty. Tätä asteittaisuutta hyödyntävät menetelmät voivat olla erityisen hyödyllisiä indeksisyyttä tutkittaessa.</p> | |
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1 | Introduction | 3 – 4 |
| 2 | Indexicality in linguistic research | 4 – 7 |
| 3 | Data and methods | 7 – 12 |
| 4 | Analysis | |
| 4.1 | Referential scopes of the activities | 12 – 13 |
| 4.2 | Indices on morpholexical level | 14 |
| 5 | Discussion | |
| 5.1 | Date culture | 15 – 19 |
| 5.2 | Considerations for further research | 19 – 20 |
| 6 | Conclusion | 20 – 21 |
| | Bibliography | 21 – 23 |

Appendix 1: Format of the Webropol survey

Appendix 2: Answers to Questions 1.1 and 2.1

1 INTRODUCTION

The study of how meaning is conveyed through use of language brings together various fields of linguistics, telling of how interesting yet elusive meaning is as an object of research. In terms of referential meaning, information is conveyed not only by the kind of meaning in our speech which relies on convention. A good deal of information is conveyed by associations of the linguistic forms we use with, for example, different kinds of social group membership. This kind of meaning does not rely on references based on convention, but has to do with the contiguity between the form and its context. Thus, for example, the speech sounds of a dialect come to be associated with the characteristics of the speech community that uses it. In turn, then, the use of these linguistic forms may contribute to an individual's personal style. The study of this latter kind of meaning, which has been conceptualized as indexical meaning, has received considerable amount of attention in sociolinguistics in the last 15 to 20 years or so (Johnstone 2016).

However, the sociolinguistic studies of indexicality have for the most part focused on the linguistic signaling of membership to different population segments distinguished by factors such as socio-economic position, region, sex, gender or ethnicity, that is, aspects of identity. Less research has been devoted to the connection between signs and micro-level socio-cultural practices. Furthermore, the research up to this point has left many options open in terms of methodology. The methodologies of different scholars of indexicality are informed by their theoretical underpinnings, where relevant questions include but are not limited to, whether indices are explicit objects of metalinguistic negotiation; whether they emerge naturally in the speech community as its members collectively differentiate themselves from others, and whether there are other ways to trace the origins of indices. It seems that the possibility has been relatively neglected that indices could be elicited by treating the (in)determinacy of a single context as a variable, possibly resulting in speakers' use of context-creating devices.

This study explores these possibilities. It aims to contribute to the growing understanding of the performance of micro-level socio-cultural practices. More specifically, the socio-cultural practice under investigation is that of asking someone out for a date. The relevant questions are whether there are linguistic forms that index an invitation for a date, and if so, what they are. Methodological issues will also be explored. In particular, a methodology that involves a

comparison of survey informants' real-life date invitations, along with their responses to a highly unspecified hypothetical situation, will be employed to uncover the indices signaling a date invitation.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section the development of the role of linguistic variables in sociolinguistic research will be shortly touched upon. A closer look will be taken on indexicality, and the present study will be situated in the larger field of studies on indexicality. Thereafter, the data will be described and a more detailed outline of the methodology will be given. The results of the analysis will then be presented, showing that there seem to be several linguistic forms whose frequency increases as the availability of contextual information decreases. In particular, the three linguistic forms identified as indices were assertive existentials, the lexeme *coffee* and the lexical item *go for*. An interpretation of the results will then take place with reference to a possible date culture. Finally, guidelines for further research will be considered.

2 INDEXICALITY IN LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

The relationship between text and context can be thought of from the perspective of cause and effect. When the effects of context on text are considered, the question at hand concerns the degree to which a linguistic variable follows from a demographic one, such as g-dropping and socio-economic status (Holmes 2013: 164). On the other hand, this ignores cases where linguistic forms are used in a creative way, for example for creating a humorous effect in parody (e.g. Podesva 2008, cited in Eckert 2008: 469-470). Here the roles of context and text, respectively as cause and effect, seem to be at least partially reversed; the text itself can contribute to its context. How this may be approached theoretically is by regarding the linguistic forms in the text as indices, that is, signs which are connected to their signifieds by contiguity (Koyama 2009: 80). Whereas the indexicality of, for example, a pointing finger is based on spatial contiguity, other types of indexicality can be based on different kinds of contextual contiguity, such as that between speech and the speaker.

As Eckert (2008: 455) notes, the study of variation in sociolinguistics has mostly regarded oft-used social categories, such as socio-economic class and geographical location as causes of variation:

This view of variables began with the sociolinguistic focus on the spread of sound change. In this view, the socio-economic hierarchy is a social space through which change spreads, and speakers' place in that space determines when they 'receive' the change. Speakers' agency in the use of variables has been viewed as limited to making claims about their place in social space by either emphasizing or downplaying their category membership through the quantitative manipulation of markers.

In her discussion of three studies that highlight the role of speakers' agency and ideology in their identification, Eckert continues (2008: 462):

Studies like Labov (1963), Eckert (2000), and Zhang (2005) clearly establish that variables that historically come to distinguish geographic dialects can take on interactional meanings based in local ideology. In all three cases, the meaning is based in ideologies about what the locality is about – what kinds of people live there and what activities, beliefs, and practices make it what it is. Local identity is never an association with a generic locale but with a particular construction of that locale as distinct from some other.

The concept of the index has been used in linguistics and linguistic anthropology in very different ways, which are distinguished by the domains of the indexed and the indices. In sociolinguistic studies, the indexed is typically some type of social category membership or an aspect of identity. It is useful to map the indexed domains in some way, such as that of Ochs (1996: 410) when she describes socialization as “in part a process of assigning situational, i.e. indexical, meanings (temporal, spatial, social identity, social act, social activity, affective or epistemic meanings) to particular linguistic forms”. The second way in which studies of indexicality can be distinguished is according to realizations of the index as, for example, a certain allophone, prosodic feature or choice of words. To my knowledge the research has mainly focused on the phonetic-phonological level, though the possibility of lexical indexicality has been suggested (Eckert 2008: 464). As has been pointed out (Beaton and Washington, 2015), indexicality on the lexical level has been studied relatively little; however, there have been some recent studies which focus on this (e.g. Beaton and Washington 2015, Christie 2013, Peterson, 2017).

The ways in which indexicality has been studied are informed by the different theoretical viewpoints of the researchers. For example, Christie (2013: 158), in her study of the indexicality of swearwords, argues that “[s]uch an analysis would begin with a search for evidence of regularity in the range of social meanings generated by the use of swearwords by analyzing the metadiscourses that recur across different types of situated cultural text”. In this setting, the indexical meanings manifest in and are, to an extent, created by discussions concerning the use of language (Agha 2003). On the other hand, Levon (2014: 540) takes a different perspective, focusing on the reception and perception of indexical meanings associated with the variation of mean pitch, sibilance and realizations of the voiceless inter-dental fricative, when he writes that “social meaning is not viewed simply as a property of the stylistic moves a speaker makes. It crucially also relies on listener uptake”. The focus on listener perception instead of the possible source of these perceptions distinguishes this approach from a number of others.

Psycholinguistic research done in relation to spoken word recognition supports the idea of indexicality, albeit in a slightly different sense, with reference to co-text, or the linguistic context as the indexed domain. This research has centered on the role of word onset density, which refers to the degree to which words have a dense neighborhood in words with similar sounding onsets (e.g. “doll”, “Dorothy”, “dormitory” or “domestic”), or a sparse neighborhood with a lesser amount of such words. The onset density of words has been found out to correlate with longer response times (for a discussion of these studies, see Vitevitch 2002) in studies where the participants had to make a judgment on whether a given item was a non-word or not. This suggests that the onset as a smaller phonological element already triggers phenomena related to lexical processing. As onsets are connected to the rest of the words through their phonetic contexts, we may consider them indices, the psychological reality of which is exemplified in this triggering.

The psycholinguistic research on indexicality has also focused on the interaction between the acoustic properties of an individual speaker’s speech and semantic processing. An example of this branch of research is that of Narayan et al. (2017), who demonstrated that the expectation of on-going speech of a single speaker correlates with the expectation of this speech being either semantically related (as in compound words, for instance), or phonologically related as in rhyming word pairs. Even though this type of research is substantially different in that the types of indexical meaning involved are primarily idiolectal, it still adds to the understanding of the

phenomenon of indexical properties of language interacting with those related to semantic processing, for example. In other words, the acoustic properties of speech unique to and indexical of a given person are perceived with an expectation of semantically meaningful speech.

It seems that little research has been carried out where contextuality itself is treated as a variable, in the sense that representations of a given context can vary in terms of their determinacy, or the availability of contextual information relevant to that context. At one end we would find real-life instances of language use, and at the other what may be termed language use in isolation (e.g. decontextualized sentences in sentential semantics). The middle area in turn would be considered to be typically occupied by discourse completion tasks, in that in their prompts they provide more or less context (Billmyer and Varghese 2000), but never to the extent of real-life situations. The idea then is that context can be thought of as a variable in the sense that it can be more or less unspecified. In the absence of context, it is predictable that certain kind of linguistic action which requires the presence of context in, for example, previous discourse will manifest differently in that the number of linguistic cues to indices of the context increase. When the relative neglect of lexical indexicality is considered, however, an interesting area for research opens. The purpose of the present study is to explore this area.

3 DATA AND METHODS

The data was collected between May 2017 and May 2018 by means of a questionnaire that was sent to the mailing list of International Degree Students studying at the University of Jyväskylä (see Appendix 1). The initial data comprised 33 responses, one of which had to be discarded as invalid. The primary linguistic data are provided by the answers to Questions 1.1, 2.1 and 2.2, which are given below. The first question concerns the respondent's real-life date invitations, whereas the latter two concern their hypothetical date invitations in hypothetical situations. These situations provided only minimal information, without any previous discourse or further contextualization. In addition, there were two initial fields in the questionnaire on which to input age and sex, a preliminary question of whether the respondent had asked someone out for a date before in English and a field for a description of the situation where the respondent had

invited someone for a date. Where there are examples from the data in the paper, the age and sex of the respondent will be given in the brackets following the example. The scope of the study came to be delimited so that only the responses to Questions 1.1 and 2.1 were analyzed.

1) Have you asked someone out for a date in English?

1.1) If yes, what did you say or write the last time you asked someone out for a date in English?

1.2) In your own words, describe the situation.

2) How would you ask for a date in English in the following situations? Write down **the exact words**.

2.1) You see someone you are interested in at the university. He/she is sitting by himself/herself. You walk up to him/her. You would like to ask him/her out for a date.

2.2) You notice someone you are interested in is online. You are both on an instant messaging application. You would like to ask him/her out for a date.

The validity of the answers varied with each question, and the questionnaire was resent until each question had at least 20 valid answers. Blank answers were regarded as invalid. Questions 1.1., 2.1 and 2.2 required the exact wording of the date invitation, which was taken as the criterion for a valid answer to them. However, there were often cases where the responses seemed to call for a closer look, despite not meeting this condition. While the survey questions required the exact wording of the date invitations, some respondents felt that concentrating on a single utterance misses an essential part of the invitation itself. Some others criticized the hypothetical situations in Questions 2.1 and 2.2 as unrealistic. These metapragmatic remarks were some of the most interesting parts of the data; while not subjected to a thorough analysis, they will be returned to in the discussion section.

The data for the primary analysis was then extracted, following the annotation of the initial data. The scope of the study had to be delimited for practical reasons so that only the infinitives in the responses will be analyzed here. The choice of focus was influenced by two reasons. Firstly, as the raw data was being annotated, it became clear that the majority of the date invitations contained infinitives and sentence structures that facilitated their use, as in (1-4) below, where “Would you like to”, “hopefully we can”, “It would be nice” and “Let’s” are examples of such structures. The infinitives are italicized.

- (1) Would you like *to go for a drink sometime* maybe? [F22]
- (2) hey it was great knowing you, hopefully we can *do something later on*, bye [M31]
- (3) It would be nice *to get to know you more* [M29]
- (4) Let's *go for a drink* [F32]

The second reason is that the immediate co-text of the infinitives is comprised of lexicogrammatical structures that can collocate with other linguistic forms. Thus, in such a co-textual framework, it would be the infinitives which ultimately determine the function of the utterance. However, it has to be stressed that there may be a limited number of co-textual structures which facilitate the use of specific infinitives that communicate date invitations, meaning that they cannot be outright ignored. To illustrate this, let us consider the idiomatic expression “It’s raining cats and dogs”. The initial “It’s raining” often collocates with a number lexical items, which include constructions such as “heavily” or “really hard”, which, together with the preceding co-text, give an expression whose meaning is more or less similar to “It’s raining cats and dogs”. But obviously the fact that the item “cats and dogs” by itself does not mean anything like the mentioned adverbs indicates that it only gains that meaning with a specific collocation, that is, “It’s raining”. Thus, the question broached here is the degree to which the meaning of the date invitations is non-compositional. To put it another way, single linguistic forms are not necessarily self-sufficient in carrying out their functions, which may, especially in the case of more polysemous lexical items, depend on the preceding discourse. Furthermore, the seeming generality of and variation among the co-texts of the infinitives may actually be illusory, if the function of the infinitives obtains from features specific to speech (including phonological phenomena such as intonation), which may be assumed to be in operation – as written discourse completion tasks are written representations of speech – and which yet are invariably neglected in them (Johnston et al. 1998).

A process of determining the specific infinitives referring to the date activity was made in cases where (1) the respondent had given multiple variants in response to the contextual variation they thought possible; (2) a single response contained many infinitives; or (3) the responses contained references relying on previous discourse that was essential to the meaning of the infinitives. In the first case, the reason for this procedure is that in any case the respondent would supposedly produce only one utterance, not multiple variations of the same utterance. The rationale behind the second case was that the date being a single event, ultimately encoded here by a single infinitive, would in turn point to a comparison of the word-forms of different

lexical items instead of higher order abstractions pertaining to multiple infinitives. This, however, reflects the problematic preconception that the date is represented by a single infinitive, produced by a single respondent. As such the analysis that follows will inevitably be partial in the cases where there were sometimes multiple infinitives contributing to the date invitation. All the cases where there were multiple infinitives either in one utterance or multiple utterances are considered in this section. With respect to the third case, if the referential meaning of the infinitive relied on previous discourse, then the relevant previous discourse was included in the analysis too. The sole verb resulting in the need for this procedure was *join* (in some activity), which required an activity to be joined in, that is, the date itself. The interpretations concerning the responses with multiple infinitives or the verb *join* will be discussed shortly.

With respect to the answers to Question 1.1 (for these and the ones to Question 2.1, see Appendix 2), the first multiple infinitives were posed by “Would you like to go to the Met together? We could also have some drinks after?” On the basis of the reported previous conversation of the respondent and her addressee, the second part will be considered to be the core of the invitation. Continuing with infinitives that made use of previous discourse, the “join me” was categorized in conjunction with the “going for some pizza” in the previous clause. The “join us” was similarly categorized with the preceding continuous form “going out”. In both of these cases the content of the preceding present participles referred to were included in the frequency analysis that will be described in the following section, for they were considered central to the meaning of the infinitives.

As regards the answers to Question 2.1, the second one of the three alternatives in a response with multiple variants, “do something later on” is most representative of a date invitation, according to the respondent himself. For example, the infinitives in the third one, “have coffee with you (and get to know you better)” were recommended only if the interest is “explicitly mutual” as the respondent put it. On the other hand, in a response with multiple infinitives “have some coffee” will be regarded as the core of the date invitation, the reason being that at least the last line “have your permission” requires previous discourse to work. The fifth line of the response proves problematic as the activity is encoded there in the form of the gerund “chatting with you” and thus escapes the scope of the analysis. There is no obvious reason for date activity not to be able to be encoded in a gerund. For the present the fourth line will be regarded as the core of the invitation. The previous discourse that the “join me” relies on is “having a coffee

and some good conversation”. For this reason they will be considered together. Similarly to the infinitives discussed in the responses to Question 1.1, the present participles were included in the analysis for the reason of them being crucial in referring to the date activity.

The first of the two parts of the primary analysis concerned the frequencies of the linguistic forms of the infinitives, with respect to both real-life and hypothetical date invitations. By this point, it needs to be pointed out for clarity that the distinguishing feature of one of the linguistic forms identified in the analysis, assertive existentials, is that they are morphologically marked by the root *some* (Quirk et al. 1985: 377). The three most prominent forms were separated from the rest and their respective changes in frequency were measured. The operational definition of an index with respect to the analysis is that indices are any linguistic forms whose frequency increases so that real-life date invitations will have a smaller amount of them. This definition follows from the fact that, because the respondents were not able to exploit context in the hypothetical situations, whether linguistic or extra-linguistic, the relevant information normally conveyed contextually had to be expressed in other ways. This is, in essence, what indexicality is all about, as described in the previous section: devices for referring to, or even creating context.

Furthermore, there is some previous research, such as that of Golato (2003), who compared German discourse completion tasks with data from Conversation Analysis which indicates that discourse completion tasks tend to produce metapragmatic data. Thus, they are more apt in producing data on how speakers *would* use language in a given situation rather than how they actually *do*, the task nevertheless being representative of the real-life situation, with various degrees of content enrichment between different versions of the instrument (Billmyer and Varghese 2000). The findings of Golato can be interpreted as arising from how the respondents react to a lack of access to contextual information, which may drive them to make assessments not only of what is acceptable in a given situation, but also the conditions of acceptability. This may, in turn, add reflective depth to how they complete the discourse in the tasks.

The second part of the primary analysis was a categorization according to the scopes of reference of the infinitives, which preceded the frequency analysis. These scopes were then ordered according to their relative degree of generality. For example, it is possible to meet up without going for a drink together, but not to go for a drink together without meeting up. Thus meeting up would be more general than going out for a drink. Likewise, it is possible to go for

a drink without having coffee, but not the other way around. Following this logic, the identified categories of BASIC SOCIAL ACTIVITIES, DRINKING, FOOD and the MISCELLANEOUS category were respectively more or less general. The first category differs from the second and third in that it includes only activities such as meeting up or going out.

4 ANALYSIS

4.1 Referential scopes of the activities

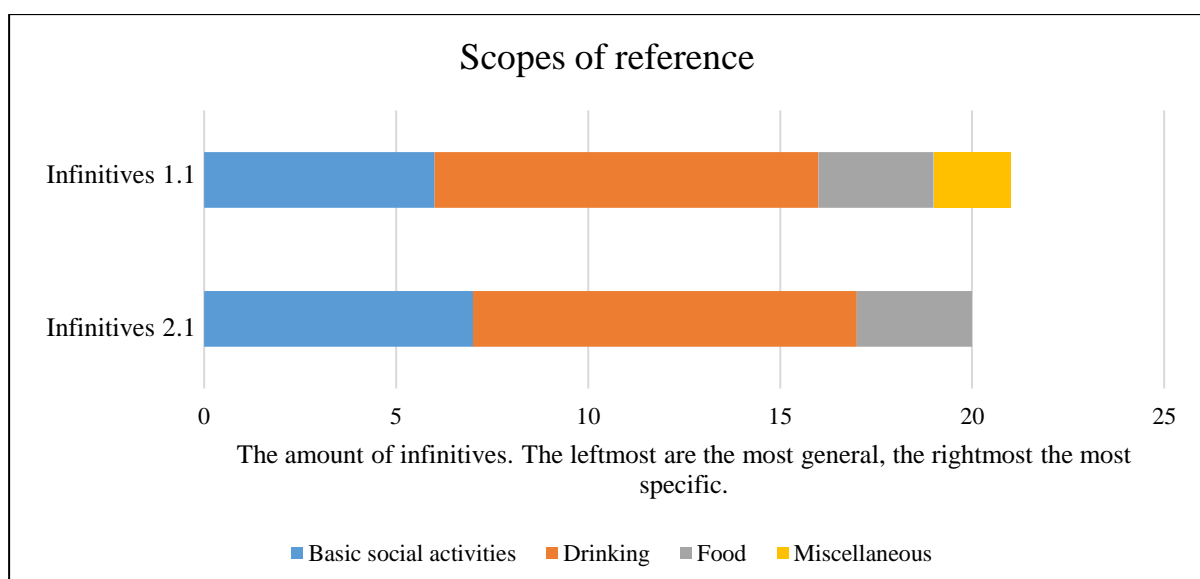
The answers to Question 1.1 were formulations of real-life date invitations the respondents had used. There were 24 valid responses to this question, 21 of which contained at least one infinitive. The category of DRINKING was the largest, comprising 10 infinitives. Examples 5-6 below are of this category. The second largest category was that of BASIC SOCIAL ACTIVITIES with 6 infinitives (examples 7-8). The rest were respectively that of FOOD (9-10), with 3 infinitives and the MISCELLANEOUS category with 2 infinitives (examples 11-12). These referential scopes, which range from more general to more specific, give an outline of what the isolated verb forms suggest the date activity to be like, with the exception of the forms with the verb *join* as exemplified in (8). Here the continuous verb form from the previous sentence had to be considered to make sense of the infinitive. It so appears that a date invitation more often refers to an activity that has to do with drinking, than just any general social activity.

- (5) go for a drink [F32]
- (6) have a cup of coffee with you [M24]
- (7) get to know you more [M29]
- (8) join us (in [Me and my friends are going out]) [M31]
- (9) join me for dinner on Saturday evening [M39]
- (10) go eat something with me [F22]
- (11) come to my friend's concert with me [F23]
- (12) go for a run [M25]

The answers to Question 2.1, on the other hand, were formulations of date invitations the respondents would use in the hypothetical situation given in the question. Here the validity of the answers became a question, since five respondents clearly noted a perceived inability to give a date invitation in a succinct form, and instead emphasized the role of larger-scale discourse and the role of context in determining the form of the invitation. Seven respondents wrote about the underlying pragmatics by criticizing the situation as unrealistic or engaging in explicit metapragmatic reflection, fully in line with Golato (2003). Many times the respondents gave their answers in a sort of indirect speech, so judgments had to be made with respect to the purposes of the study. Infinitives were present in 20 answers. As with Question 1.1, the largest category was that of DRINKING with 10 infinitives, with examples given in 13-14. The second largest was the category of BASIC SOCIAL ACTIVITIES with 7 infinitives (examples 15-16). The remaining category was that of FOOD, with three infinitives (examples 17-18). The distribution of these infinitives and those in the answers to Question 1.1 is illustrated in Figure 1.

- (13) go for a coffee sometime [F33]
- (14) have some coffee [M31]
- (15) do something together tonight [F20]
- (16) continue to meet some other time [M29]
- (17) grab some lunch with me sometime [F23]
- (18) get some lunch sometime this week [F28]

Figure 1. Infinitives and their scopes of reference.

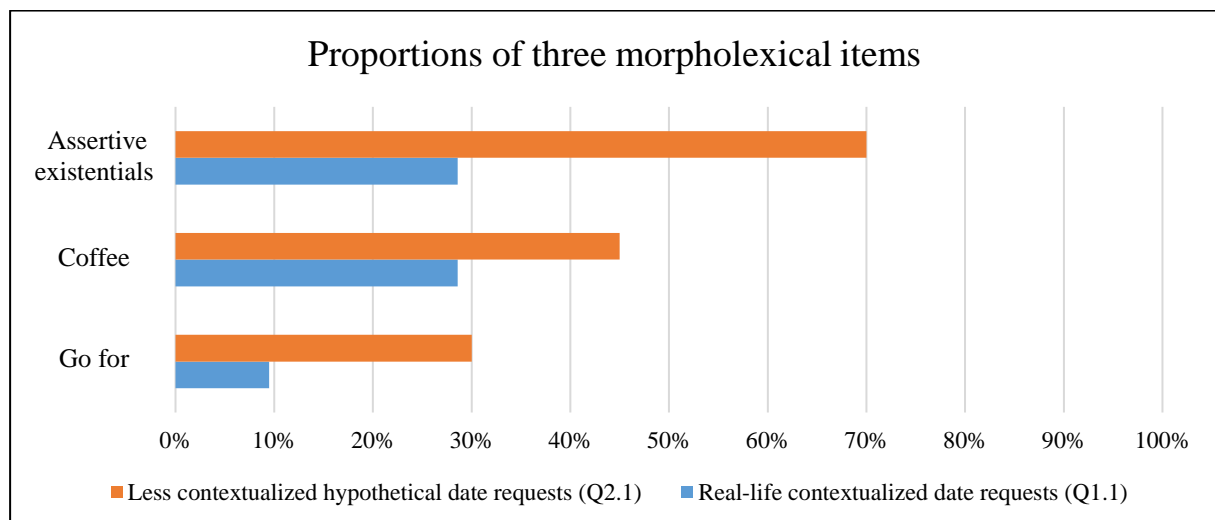


4.2 Indices on morpholexical level

Following the categorization, the three most prominent morpholexical forms were identified on an intuitive basis, that is, they were the most perceptually salient linguistic forms. Changes in their frequency with regard to the availability of context were then measured. The three elements were assertive existentials, the lexeme *coffee* and the lexical item *go for*. It turned out that each of these forms went through an increase in relative proportions, when the real-life utterances were compared with the responses to the hypothetical situation. These changes in frequencies are illustrated in Figure 2. Especially striking was the over twofold increase in the amount of assertive existentials in the hypothetical date invitations. Thus, while the referential scopes of the activities remain mostly constant between fully contextualized utterances in responses to Question 1.1 and those lightly contextualized in those to Question 2.1, contextualization has an effect on the morpholexical level.

The proportion of assertive existentials rose from 28.6% to 70%, making them the most prominent element of the three, that is, the amount of responses that contained these linguistic forms was 28.6% of the whole number of responses to Question 1.1, whereas this amount rose to 70% in responses to Question 2.1. The second element, the lexeme *coffee*, similarly increased from 28.6% to 45% in proportion. Excluding one occurrence of *tea*, coffee was the only specified drink in the responses to Questions 1.1 and 2.1. The third element was the lexical item *go for*, as in example (13). The proportions of this element increased from 9.5% to 30%.

Figure 2. Proportions of the three morpholexical items.



5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Date culture

The data reflects the respondents' beliefs in how one successfully communicates a date invitation. In what follows, the indices uncovered by the frequency analysis will be interpreted in terms of their possible sources and the processes of their adoption into discourse indexing the function of asking someone out for a date. The discussion will take a similar stance as that of Levon (2014) in that it will be the perception of the indexical linguistic forms that will be focused on. However, what will be concentrated on here will be speaker perception rather than hearer perception. While the present study approached the phenomenon of indexicality from the perspective of the speaker, the consideration of the role of beliefs and stereotypes is potentially fruitful here as well, because it opens up the discussion of where the associations of indices with the contextual features that they signify might stem from.

One theory is that indexical references are first rooted in the local linguistic practice of a community, which has been termed first-order indexicality by Silverstein (2003). From there they gain indexical meanings by coming to be associated with the community through repeated use. An example would be Received Pronunciation as a 16th century regional prestige sociolect spoken in southeastern England, especially in London and the Oxbridge universities (Agha 2003: 244). A pressing question is how, where context is absent, context-related meanings can nevertheless be coupled with linguistic forms from the perspective of a language user who may be an outsider to the community. As Agha shows, the moment the meanings become a question, the indexical values shed their local spatiotemporal restrictions and in the course of time become supra-local signals of things such as good upbringing, education and manners through perpetrators of metadiscourse such as dictionaries, public schools and penny weeklies. In Silverstein's (ibid.) widely adopted terminology, this is an instance of what is termed $n+1^{\text{st}}$ order indexicality.

How this brief recourse relates to the results of the analysis is that the indexical properties of any linguistic form that emerges as an index from the frequency analysis are either products of the observable distribution of the linguistic form in real-life instances of asking someone out for date, or then products of the metadiscourse that spread through certain metadiscoursal

genres. With respect to the latter explanation, one could think of magazines that give dating advice, or perhaps Internet forums where people ask for advice on how to ask someone out for a date. For the first alternative, the basis of the indices would lie – similarly to the early role of Received Pronunciation as a regional sociolect – in the kind of variation that observably distinguishes a date invitation from a number of other social performances. For example, a drink such as coffee may, for whatever reason, simply be mentioned more when people invite someone for a date. Thus, it would be this natural salience that elects it as a candidate for being a feature of the stereotypical date invitation. In the light of this, the hypothetical date invitations such as the following (19-22), which will be quoted at length, emerge as exaggerations of naturally occurring discourse. The reason they are exaggerations is because they involve notable increases in the frequency of the linguistic forms which characterize the date invitation. The infinitives are in italics.

(19) Hi, how are you doing? Hey so, I was wondering if you'd like to *get coffee together sometime*? [F31]

(20) Hey! How are you? How is your courses going? Would you like to *go for some coffee*? [F24]

(21) Hi [person's name]! I really think we should *go for a coffee sometime*. What do you think? [F33]

(22) Hey, you wanna *go for coffee or drink*? [M26]

Indexicality is seemingly not formed solely on basis of local participation nor of metadiscourse. Were the latter the case, it could be pointed out that recognizing that, for example, another person comes from the same region one grew up in requires no metapragmatic negotiation. The indexical meanings of a dialect are not only the product of the metadiscourse of its speech community, but also the product of continuous participation in it. For the present purposes, participation as a potential source of indexical meanings will be considered in the following, for it leads to the interesting question of whether some kind of date culture prevails.

It is one thing to regard participation as the source of indexical meanings, and another to question the basis of particular forms coming to convey them. More specifically, the question can be posed whether it is the participants who actively interpret their culture, thereby selecting the indexical forms to be representative of it, or the culture that imposes itself on the people participating in it, thus guiding their choices of appropriate indexical forms. With respect to the

results, open for speculation is, whether the reason for the use of the linguistic forms is either that for some reason people are selectively aware of those forms, or that those forms stand out by themselves. In concrete terms, a relevant question would be, for example, whether the respondents in examples (19-21) have chosen to exaggerate the use of assertive existentials because their use is a distinguishing feature of real-life date invitations, or because they interpret those forms, which would not otherwise be distinguishing features, as characteristic to date invitations in the course of naturally occurring discourse. The former would point to something closer to the metadiscourse touched upon above.

If there indeed is a date culture, and the three linguistic forms identified in the study have come to index it, then these forms likely occupy noticeable roles in its linguistic practice. Here it is assumed that wide-spread use of the linguistic forms leads to the adoption of them as indices of the practice itself. Perhaps in a natural setting this functional context is established by means of discourse, thus enabling seemingly transparent linguistic items (Silverstein's first-order indices) to carry the meaning of a date, such as *go for a drink*. However, when the context is removed, this same procedure has to be carried out with other means, for example through the excessive use of recurrent lexemes such as *coffee* or *drink*. On the surface level, this might be the reason they have come to index the whole procedure of asking someone out for a date. Yet there could be more to it, if the possibility is considered that the linguistic forms capture something essential about the culture that is not explicit. An example would be the highlighting of the transparency itself, which could gain the character of indefiniteness. This could be the case especially with the assertive existentials.

The reason why it is the assertive existentials which index the date invitation functionality could be that they reflect the avoidance of explicit mentions of the date, as in real-life situations where the intention is encoded in longer stretches of discourse and extralinguistic cues in body language. The date invitation being thus encoded, the specifics of the activity itself are not so essential to the meaning of the utterance and allow for variation suitable to context. In the light of the data, it could be suggested that there are indeed few lexical elements that in and of themselves communicate the date invitation in situations where there are more opportunities for building previous discourse and communication through means such as body language. The lexeme *date* is a prime example; it is virtually never present in date invitations. The sole exception to this in the data occurred during a conversation where the interlocutors were already in a relationship. On the other hand, the function being embedded in larger units of discourse

allows the participants to infer additional meaning from smaller elements. This condition where preceding discourse and body language allow one to infer a distinct meaning from a number of different linguistic forms could be reflected by the use of indefinite constructions such as assertive existentials. Open for speculation is whether assertive existentials or similar constructions are also used in other cultural practices in which mentions of the practice are likewise omitted.

Even if people avoid explicitly mentioning the date, it does not mean that a date is some unspecified activity that no one is aware of. On the contrary, it is highly specific, and this is what makes communicating the date invitation such an interesting phenomenon. As one respondent explains in his response to Question 2.1:

(23) This is very challenging. I have never done that. if I have to I would start with some normal conversation, asking a date directly doesn't seem to be a normal person behavior.
[M28]

Another way to account for the use of assertive existentials would be to regard them as hedge constructions, especially in the case of *or something* and more often *sometime* (as in examples 24-25). However, the data shows that some of the assertive existentials do not function as hedges, for example in (26-27) where there is no obvious message to be softened or modified. Rather, the assertive existential constitutes a necessary part of the message itself. In the cases where the assertive existentials indeed take the role of hedges, it could be argued that these hedges are used in a manner where they actually contribute to the intimacy of the utterance as indices, which is compatible with the notion that they are indeed typically used as softeners of messages that carry sensitive content.

(24) Hej, do you want to go for a coffee or something? [M25]

(25) Hi, how are you doing? Hey so, I was wondering if you'd like to get coffee together sometime? [F31]

(26) Hey, how's it going? ... Do you want to do something together tonight? [F20]

(27) hey it was great knowing you, hopefully we can do something later on, bye [M31]

It is unlikely that the indefinite forms are monofunctional. In a comprehensive account of the different functions, part of which is served by indexical references, they all contribute to the

broader task of asking someone out for a date. In addition to the indexical functions discussed above, hedging functions contribute to the message too, and in their realizations overlap with the former. By way of personal communication, I was also told that people might use indefinite constructions “because it makes it harder to refuse”. Indeed, it is possible to understand a refusal of an invitation such as (26) as preferring not to do *anything* together. This definitely highlights the complex, self-aware metapragmatics where people strategically exploit the folk concepts of the literal and the indirect (Silverstein 2010), the corresponding modes of interpretation and the issues of ambivalence therein.

5.2 Considerations for further research

Before concluding this paper, a word should be said about the limitations and shortcomings of the study. Further research should consider a broader analysis of speakers’ utterances, not only spanning whole sentences, but entire responses. In the end, the date invitations seem to work in a rather holistic fashion, pointing to a more thorough analysis. Moreover, with respect to the categorization scheme, the research should probe into other ways of categorizing data, which produce less ambiguities of order, and which reduce the number of borderlines cases, or are capable of differentiating the responses better. There is also the question of how to determine the references in more reliable ways than simply on an intuitive basis. Furthermore, it must be taken into account that the nature of the data itself excludes analysis on phonetic or phonological level, when it comes to possible extralinguistic factors such as body position and the like, even though there is no reason to deny their possible influence. With respect to the kind of elicitation methods used here, it is crucial that future studies control the availability of contextual information; more specifically, they must minimize the possibility of respondents filling out the missing context, for example, in their imagination. Finally, researchers should be critical of equating respondents’ reported language use with observed data as was done in this study. While there may be considerable resemblance between reported and observed data, the former may not necessarily be representative of the latter.

A number of questions remain for further research to explore both in terms of methodology and possible objects of research. An interesting question for further research is the identification of all relevant factors relating to the formation of the beliefs that influence the use of linguistic

forms used in asking someone out for a date. Furthermore, the uptake of these indexical forms constitutes a fertile field of inquiry. Finally, further research should consider the data more broadly than was done here; an undertaking where computer analyses of lexical frequencies might prove to be useful. This would involve corpora of more or less indexically enriched language, the compilation of which is permitted by the methodology applied here.

The two last points to be mentioned are brief and concern the sample of informant-based data and how the distribution and frequencies of linguistic forms were determined in Section 4. To begin with, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the collected data. The sample size was quite small ($n = 33$), and it needs to be kept in mind that the informants are international degree students studying at the University of Jyväskylä. The results of the study cannot be generalized outside this group. Moreover, the backgrounds of the informants and their effects were not taken into account in the study. The study would have also benefited from a computerized lexical analysis to precisely determine the distribution and frequencies of different lexical items.

6 CONCLUSION

Developments in sociolinguistics have come to appreciate speakers' agency in their self-representation, but have to a degree neglected the consideration of what language users *do* as opposed to who they *are*. People do not simply receive sociolect-distinguishing linguistic variables from some kind of societal structure that looms over them. Rather, speakers creatively use linguistic forms they believe to be associated with different aspects of identity and social functions not only to express themselves, but in the light of the data, also to communicate effectively.

The present study proceeded from the outset that, if asking someone out for a date is a function to a degree embedded in context, for example in the form of body language and longer stretches of discourse, and if this function must be carried out with the context being undetermined, then the relevant information must be conveyed through other means. It was assumed that such an effect can be detected as an increase of corresponding, indexical linguistic forms in the text.

Three such forms were identified: assertive existentials, the lexeme *coffee* and the lexical item *go for*. Their frequencies increased from 28.6% to 70%, from 28.6% to 45% and from 9.5% to 30% respectively, when real-life date invitations were compared to hypothetical ones.

As noted above, one reason for informants' choice of these particular linguistic forms may be that they have acquired particular beliefs about the association of these forms with asking someone out for a date through engagement with observable date culture, though metadiscourse may also be one source of these beliefs. A full-fledged inquiry into indexicality obviously requires a broad array of methods. For uncovering the indices, the kind of comparison done here of reported real-life data with metapragmatically influenced survey responses would point towards corpus-based methods, yielding interesting opportunities to broaden the methodological horizons in indexically oriented sociolinguistics.

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APPENDIX 1: FORMAT OF THE WEBROPOL SURVEY

Asking for a date in English as an International Language

| | |
|-----|--|
| Age | |
| Sex | |

1) Have you asked someone out for a date in English?

☐ Yes

☐ No

1.1) If yes, what did you say or write the last time you asked someone out for a date in English? Write down **the exact words**.

1.2) In your own words, describe the situation.

2) How would you ask for a date in English in the following situations? Write down **the exact words**.

2.1) You see someone you are interested in at the university. He/she is sitting by himself/herself. You walk up to him/her. You would like to ask him/her out for a date.

2.2) You notice someone you are interested in is online. You are both on an instant messaging application. You would like to ask him/her out for a date.

APPENDIX 2: ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS 1.1 AND 2.1

3. 1.1) If yes, what did you say or write the last time you asked someone out for a date in English? Write down the exact words.

Number of respondents: 25

| Responses |
|--|
| "Would you like to go to the Met together? We could also have some drinks after". |
| Hi, would you like to go out with me. |
| Can we hang out for coffee or something? |
| Would you like to meet up? |
| Hi, it was very nice to meet you the other day at Sandra's party, what do you think of a movie night maybe at my place or your place? :) |
| If by "date" you mean a meeting with the intention to engage in sexual partnership, then I would say something like the following (I do not remember exactly what I said though): "Would you like to meet me to share a pot of tea or other beverage?" |
| Hey, how about a coffee sometime? It would be nice to get to know you more :) |
| Dear, I would like to take you out. I was thinking dinner, movie and dancing. Would you like that? |
| Would you like to come to my friend's concert with me? |
| I would like to get to know you better, would you like to hang out? |
| Let's go for a drink |
| Do you wanna go for a run? |
| I am going out for some pizza, would you like to join me? |
| Me and my friends are going out, would you like to join us? |
| I'd be glad to have a cup of coffee with you! |
| Would you like to continue this conversation in person over a drink? |
| Sorry for spoiling your survey, but please consider stopping spamming the ids list with your request. Once or twice is fine, but this is n-th time already. |
| Would you like to join me for dinner on Saturday evening? |
| (texting) Hey, do you want to go get a coffee or something this week? |
| Would you like to talk about this more over a coffee? |
| Would you like to go eat something with me? |
| Would you like to go out for a coffee? |
| "Would you like to have some coffee with me later this week?" Or something similar |
| How about a coffee? |
| Hey, what do you think if we go out and like more than just friends? |

5.2.1) You see someone you are interested in at the university. He/she is sitting by himself/herself. You walk up to him/her. You would like to ask him/her out for a date.

Number of respondents: 30

| Responses |
|--|
| I probably wouldn't touch that person in Finland, I learned to respect personal space here :D But in case I couldn't imagine my life without that person, I'd say something like : "Hey! I'm *my name*. I got a question for you. Would you like to go for a drink sometime maybe?" |
| This is very challenging. I have never done that. if I have to, I would start with some normal conversation, asking a date directly doesn't seem to be a normal person behavior. |
| Hey, you wanna go for coffee or drink? |
| Hey there, would you like to join me for lunch or coffee in town later? |
| It is easier for me to write than to speak about dates. So i dont recall anytime where I have done that in person. Mostly it has been through fb, wassap, etc. |
| I wouldn't walk to a person that I do not know and ask a date. However if I already know that person (even if I know her little) I would first engage in conversation and see how it goes, I would try to know about her and to decide what kind of date would be appropriate, for example to meet for a walk around the lake or to meet at a bar or to go to a movie, to have dinner, etc.. If I still want to ask her if she would like to meet me then I would say something like "Would you like to meet me on (day, hour) at (place)? ". I cannot write the exact words as you ask because everyone is different and the contexts in which people meet are different as well, thus it makes no sense to invite everyone in the same way. |
| Hey, I saw you from there, I thought I should say "Hi" You wanna go out sometime ? |
| Hi, my name is xxx. I couldn't help noticing your nice smile. Would you like to grab some lunch with me sometime? Do you use WhatsApp? |
| Hi, How are you? Insert casual chitchat Would you like to have coffee sometime? |
| Hey! How are you doing? I was thinking of having a coffee and some good conversation, would you like to join me? |
| I would say "hi, let's go for a drink" |
| Hej, do you want to go for a coffee or something? |
| Just introduce myself, say something interesting or funny to capture her attention and ask her out for coffee or some drinks movie and then take her number |
| 1) Avoid showing interest: "it's cold out here, huh?" or "the food isn't so bad here" or just a polite "hey" and smile. 2) Establish rapport and FRIENDLY atmosphere: "Do you come here a lot? What would you recommend me to take / read / eat?", or "what I like about being here is...", whatever establishes a comfortable zone. 3a) Share a non-compromising invitation: "hey, I was about to eat / see / enter ... (whatever) ... would you like to join me?" This is bound to fail without rapport, so only in extreme situations. 3b) Seed the idea, but not deliver: "hey it was great knowing you, hopefully we can do something later on, bye" so that you avoid being intrusive, you seed the interest, but you keep that so that the idea grows on its own. Build expectation AND comfortness. The idea is to always be friendly, because that opens up the possibility that something can grow afterwards if the interest is not mutual at first. Whereas if you come completely determined and intrusive, you're likely to look like a psycho instead of an interesting person. Of course, if the interest is explicitly mutual, stop fooling around and go straight for the "I'd love to have coffee with you (and get to know you better)". |
| Ask if we have met before, she is looking familiar to me. I would tell her my name and ask her. After a little of chatting I would ask her phone number or social network account. Then I would ask for a date via messaging. |
| I would not ask them on a date because I'm mortified of rejection so I would probably batter my eye lashed at them but never work up the courage to approach them, in any language. |
| I wouldnt ask her out right away. I would do some conversation first and proceed as in (1.1 and 1.2). For example: "Hello, may I join you? My name is Alex, and yours?" Then I will see how it goes with the conversation and then I would ask her to meet some other time. |
| Hey, how's it going? ... Do you want to do something together tonight? (Honestly I probably wouldn't just walk up to someone and ask them out though) |
| Hi [person's name]! I really think we should go for a coffee sometime. What do you think? |
| Hey, mind if I join you? How are you? Would you maybe like to get some lunch sometime this week? |
| Hi, I am Amin It is a beautiful weather. Would you like to have some coffee? I am very interested in chatting with you when I met you from the very beginning. May I have your permission please? |
| Hey! How are you? How is your courses going? Would you like to go for some coffee? |
| Hi, my name is __, I think you are incredibly attractive and would like to invite you on a date. |
| this situation is not realistic (close questions would be better here) |
| Hi, how are you doing? Hey so, I was wondering if you'd like to get coffee together sometime? |
| Hi, how are you? Could I join you for a bit? *make small talk* Would you like to go out together on Saturday? |
| I wouldn't ask directly for a date. I would start a conversation and suggest we meet again later. |

| Responses |
|--|
| I would never ask for a date only based on appearance... without first having met the person. It is only when interest arise through talking. I don't think just approaching somebody to ask for a romantic date is appropriate. |
| Hi! Do you always sit on your own? I'm -blank-, nice to meet you! Unfortunately I am kinda busy at the moment but i was hoping we could continue to meet some other time? |
| I wont do that because the person might be busy doing important stuff. This situation doesn't seem to be very good for asking a date. |